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older but no wiser – skeffington 50 years on

Sue Brownill, Geraint Ellis, Andy Inch and Francesca Sartorio
consider what – if anything – we have learnt about participation
in the 50 years since the publication of the groundbreaking
Skeffington Report on public participation in planning

Writing in the October 2018 issue of *Town & Country Planning*, David Lock¹ raised some important points about the state of public participation in planning 50 years on from the Skeffington Report,² stating starkly that ‘we have gone backwards since then’. The same intention of reflecting on 50 years of public participation was behind a roundtable organised at the UK and Ireland Planning Research Conference held in Sheffield in September last year. In this article the organisers of the roundtable bring together the observations of panellists and participants alike to shed some light on what we have learnt (if anything) about participation over the last 50 years.

Rather than going backwards, we would argue that there have always been inherent tensions and contradictions in the way that participation in planning has operated, both pre- and post-Skeffington. In particular, the triangular relationship between people, plans and property, where the state guides individual property through planning and the people try to guide the state through democratic means, has been at the heart of the experience of (and frustrations with) participation over the years. These tensions have led to a constant ‘crisis’ of participation, with repeated attempts to ‘fix’ it, most recently through the localism agenda in England. The persistent nature of these tensions has meant that participation may well be older, but neither it nor we are necessarily any wiser about how to overcome them.

Skeffington in context

The report of the Skeffington Committee remains one of the most influential planning documents in the UK and beyond; witness the fact that we are still talking about it today. As one of our panellists,

Francesca Sartorio, pointed out, it is widely seen as setting out for the first time the case for and mechanisms of public participation in public service provision, and as one of the first recognitions of the rights of the public in planning. It is therefore a landmark document and one which should rightly be celebrated. However, she went on to caution that, perhaps because it is such a landmark document, it is often just nodded to rather than critically explored.

The Skeffington Committee itself consisted mainly of white, middle-aged men (not unusual for the time), whose understanding of the issues was perhaps reflected in the drawings in the report, which tend to represent a nostalgic harking back to a village life which probably didn’t exist even in 1968, if ever.

It is also important to remember that participation did not begin with Skeffington. In effect the Committee was charged with exploring good practice recommendations for how local authorities should discharge the new duties for participation in local plan-making introduced by the 1968 Town and Country Planning Act. As a result, the debate was initiated within the confines of the statutory planning system.

The Skeffington Report can also be seen as a response to the growing activism around planning and other civil rights at the time, and some have called it a limited document, with a tightly drawn remit aimed at covering over growing public discontent with planning.³ Despite this, it broke new ground in recognising rights to participation and ‘codifying’ – as Andy Inch, who convened the session, called it – a set of practices where little already existed; in effect institutionalising participation for the first time.



One of the legacies of the Skeffington Report may be that too great a focus has been given to the formal 'invited' spaces of participation, set by the framework laid out by Skeffington, legislation and custom and practice

The 'long crisis'

So Skeffington put participation in planning on the map, but also marked the start of its 'long crisis'. It codified participation within a legal bureaucratic system with inherent limitations (of which more below). It therefore represented a particular remaking of the relationship between the state and its citizens which encapsulated contradictions and tensions that proved unresolvable then and remain unresolvable now.

Sue Brownill, another panellist, noted how similar the language, recommendations and exhortations in the Skeffington Report are to every subsequent policy statement on participation in planning in England that followed. For example, it talks of participatory democracy: 'it may be that the evolution of the structures of representative government which has concerned western nations for the last century and a half is now entering a new phase'. It states that 'planning is a prime example of the need for this participation for it affects everyone' (repeated in 2008 reforms) and notes the impact on people of plans 'imposed without respect for their views'.

The report also mirrors statements made about Neighbourhood Plans by saying that 'people should be able to say what kind of community they want and how it should develop'. It prefigured talk of localism and the 'Big Society' by stating that 'participation offers the opportunity of serving the

community'. And when introducing the 1968 Act, Minister for Housing and Local Government Antony Greenwood said the government was 'determined that there should be more real participation in planning'. How many times have we heard that a new initiative would result in 'real' or 'meaningful' participation?

These inherent tensions are often repeated in criticisms of participation, including those from David Lock: the fact that many local planning authorities do the minimum; that participation becomes a tick-box exercise; that the balance of power is not fundamentally altered or challenged by participation; that, just as Skeffington responded to the civil rights movements of the 1960s, it can be seen as a way of neutralising protest and dissent; and that it can be exclusionary and that only those with the loudest voices and necessary expertise engage, with the result that state/citizen relations become managed and regulated within a particular format.

Yes, there can be improvements in methods (although we need to be careful of falling into the trap of generalising from examples of 'boutique participation' here, as another panellist, Geoff Vigar, cautioned). There have been ups and downs in the participatory intent of different governments and there are exceptions in particular places at particular times. Overall, it is better to have the statutory right

to participation than not. Nor is this to argue that the context within which these relations occur has remained the same – as Geoff pointed out, the ‘problem’ in 1968 was the dominance of experts and now it is the dominance of markets. However, these contradictions also mean that, like Groundhog Day, every later statement is doomed to say the same things and result in the same, limited outcomes.

Leading on from this, one thing that came out very strongly from our discussion was the lack of learning from or reflection on the experience of participation. In effect we have not wised up. As Francesca Sartorio pointed out, there has never been an official review of Skeffington. One area where this lack of learning is key is in understanding where and how participation fits (or doesn’t) within the rest of the planning system.

Two particular factors were raised by the panel and the audience in respect to this. The first is the legal/bureaucratic element of the planning system. Neil Harris reminded us of Patrick McAuslan’s three ideologies of planning law: public interest, private property, and public participation itself.⁴ In effect we cannot look at participation without seeing it as part of the system as a whole. This means that participation is ensnared in a complex web of relations in the planning process, and that when people engage they are coming up against other people’s private property rights, as well as whatever may be deemed the ‘public interest’.

‘When we use our computers to produce a document, we don’t need to know the code for the word processing programme; but planners expect people to know the code that lies behind the statutory planning system to engage with it’

Others drew attention to the current difficulties facing neighbourhood planners who were promised a ‘light touch’ route through the regulatory system, only to be caught up in having to write sound policies which are in conformity with existing Local Plans. Lucy Natarajan pointed out that people are effectively becoming planners in the neighbourhood planning processes, and therefore it is important to ask ourselves whether publics necessarily appreciate in advance the size of the workload. Furthermore, she wondered whether the associated shift in the role from a ‘citizen’ to a more formal

‘citizen planner’ excludes certain types of lay knowledge from the planning system and thus squeezes out the very essence of ‘publics’ in participation. Do people know where their views go in the black box of decision-making? Sue Brownill talked about a participation exercise in Oxford which always had on hand a cartoon of the decision-making process to make this clear – but this is another example of an exception not the rule.

From a broader perspective, another of the panellists, Huw Thomas, made the point that little in contemporary life prepares us to actively participate in democratic decision-making. In this regard, participation in planning has to fight against prevailing forces.

There is also often a disconnect between what people care about and the overly complex systems through which planning allows them to express their views. Andrew Wood drew attention to a recent appeal inquiry regarding a large speculative housing development at which the public turned out in force. But they had to sit through day after day of a technical, ‘mind-numbingly dull’ discussion about land supply and housing need. ‘You can just feel them all sitting there saying this has absolutely nothing to do with the question of whether this piece of land next to our community should be developed or not,’ said Andrew. Even though the group had employed a consultant to represent their views in the language of the planning system, this did not prevent the perception that participation can be meaningless and tokenistic when the proceedings of planning, and ultimately the decisions relating to particular sites, are dominated by factors that appear abstract and opaque to the community.

Andy Inch drew an analogy with software here. When we use our computers to produce a document, we don’t need to know the code for the word processing programme; but planners expect people to know the code that lies behind the statutory planning system to engage with it. So people have to become (de)coders not just users, or pay people (consultants) who can code for them. It is perhaps unsurprising that only a minority of people want to go that far.

Katie McClymont took this analogy further, noting how planning ‘codes’ in certain ways with certain assumptions about how people live, what home is, how the market works, etc. Breaking those codes, which is often what people are hoping to do through participation, is a vast challenge.

Geoff Vigar talked about the promise of technology in breaking through this impasse and the work of the Digital Civics unit at Newcastle University, which is looking at the use of online games, audio technology and smart phone videos. It is notable that Skeffington too placed faith in the potential of then new technologies to enable participation. Geoff was surely therefore right to caution that there is no

magic bullet, particularly as this information has to be used by local planning authorities that are currently experiencing budget cuts and staff shortages.

So what next?

So if we are to get wiser, what do we need to do? One thing is to recognise the statutory planning system and the institutionalisation of participation within it for what it is. While we may have been critical, our discussion also recognised that, as Francesca said, 'having such a system is really important to our society because it shows we really care about it'.

One avenue may be to learn lessons from other places and alternative ways of thinking. Tim Marshall urged us to 'stand back a bit and not get too depressed' and to explore lessons from a range of other examples past and present – such as regional planning under New Labour, consultation on a big scale with the London Plan, or the ways that France approaches consultation for big infrastructure projects, relating to the law and drawing on a toolkit of methods from digital methods to citizen juries. Another ingredient is to engage with wider theorisations from beyond planning – for example on deliberative democracy. If Skeffington led the way on participation, we now need to accept that planning has much to learn from experience elsewhere.

Sue Brownill suggested that we look also at what has happened outside the formal planning system over the last 50 years if we want to re-imagine participation. Perhaps one of the legacies of Skeffington is that we have focused too much on those formal 'invited' spaces of participation⁵ within which the parameters (and resulting frustrations) are set by the framework laid out by Skeffington, planning legislation and custom and practice. The 50 years since Skeffington have also witnessed activity outside this restrictive state/society relation, including community campaigns, popular plans, advocacy planning, and citizen-led initiatives such as self-build and community land trusts. But arguably these 'claimed' and 'insurgent' spaces⁶ of a more activist planning, and the lessons that might be learnt from them, have been relatively neglected in thinking about participation and the forms it could take.

These alternatives suggest breaking out of the Skeffington mould with its in-built restrictions in three main ways. First, through moving beyond a focus on getting voices heard and a seat at the table, to securing power through direct ownership of and access to land, assets and resources. Secondly, by moving from responding to proposals to people putting their own plans forward. Thirdly, citizen-led initiatives have often advocated alternative purposes for planning beyond those enshrined in both government policies and particular

developments, i.e. the recoding mentioned above. This suggests that participation should be more than ticking a box to say that democracy has been put into (limited) effect, and that one of its purposes should be to (re)assert the social purposes of planning which were, even if only implicitly, more apparent in the days of Skeffington.

Over the coming months we are hoping to continue these debates by talking to people and organising events to discuss Skeffington and its legacies. One of these events is a workshop on 5 June at TCPA offices in London. If you are interested in attending this and/or have any thoughts or reflections on Skeffington and participation you would like to share, please contact us on the email address below. Maybe through this process we can break out of the Groundhog Day loop, and planning can become a bit wiser as well as older.

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Notes

- 1 D Lock: 'Trustworthy public engagement'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2018, Vol. 87, Oct., 376-78
- 2 *People and Planning: Report of the Committee on Public Participation in Planning*. Skeffington Report. HMSO, 1969
- 3 S Damer and C Hague: 'Public participation in planning: a review'. *Town Planning Review*, 1971, Vol. 42 (3), 217-32
- 4 P McAuslan: *The Ideologies of Planning Law*. Pergamon Press, 1980
- 5 A Cornwall: 'New democratic spaces? The politics and dynamics of institutionalised participation'. *IDS Bulletin*, 2004, Vol. 35(2), 1-10
- 6 F Miraftab: 'Insurgent planning: situating radical planning in the Global South'. *Planning Theory*, 2009, Vol. 8 (1), 32-50